



BEYOND PHYSICAL SCARS: THE WEAPONIZATION OF WOMEN IN THE CONGO CONFLICT AND ITS ENDURING IMPACT

Mrinalini Jha

ABSTRACT

The paper showcases the concept of embodied resistance in war-torn areas characterized by identity-based disputes. It focuses on how marginalised bodies, particularly women, challenge power hierarchies through a feminist lens. It contends that these conflicts often make the body a site of struggle, where power dynamics are both enforced and challenged. This paper examines the Congo conflict as a case study, assessing the various ways in which women's bodies are weaponized, the terrible repercussions for survivors, and the ongoing difficulty in resisting this heinous practice. This investigates the systematic weaponisation of women's bodies where sexual assault has been utilized not only as a weapon of war, but also as a means of control and humiliation. The systematic use of sexual violence against women has been an especially heinous aspect of this pervasive violence, turning their bodies into battlefields. It demonstrates how sexual assault in the DRC goes beyond individual suffering, serving as a planned tactic to destroy communities, displace populations, and erode cultural coherence, and drawing on feminist theorists like Cynthia Enloe, Carol Pateman, and Karen Bouwer, the roles of militarism in perpetuating gendered violence. The study emphasizes how resistance is shaped not simply through organized activism.

KEYWORDS: Embodied Resistance, Marginalised Bodies, Identity-Based, Gendered Violence

INTRODUCTION

Embodied resistance does not have to be loud or outwardly political. It acknowledges that while other modes of resistance may be restricted or unattainable, the body serves as the primary site of power and resistance. This resistance often takes the form of unconventional manifestations and can be either individual or communal. It explores the nuanced yet powerful ways people express their humanity, agency, and opposition to war, transcending formal military or political contexts and activities. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is now known as the "rape capital of the world," with specialists reporting a "rape epidemic." Human Rights Watch has condemned a "war within a war" involving a large number of rapes and sexual assaults against women.

Several variables can explain rape as a weapon of war, but it is never justified. Poverty and patriarchy are the two primary factors. The "rape as a weapon of war narrative," however, has been contested by some scholars, who caution that it overlooks the increasing number of rapes committed by "ordinary citizens."

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) has become a prevalent and devastating war tactic. Armed actors, including both state and non-state groups, use rape, sexual slavery, forced marriage, and other types of sexual and gender-based violence to frighten and displace people, exert control, and destroy social fabric. The extent of SGBV in the DRC is astonishing, with the eastern regions suffering the brunt of the violence.

The weaponization of women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a multidimensional issue that encompasses a range of systematic techniques aimed at destabilizing communities

and controlling resources. At its heart is the pervasive and systematic use of sexual violence, which senior UN officials have warned is used as a "tactic of war against civilians" by all parties involved in the fight. Intentional destruction of social structures and cultural identity, economic exploitation, and forced relocation are all examples of weaponization in addition to overt physical attacks.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The First Congo War (1996-1997) began following the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, in which ethnic Hutu extremists slaughtered an estimated one million minority ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda (DRC's eastern border). During and after the genocide, almost two million Hutu refugees crossed the Congolese border, landing primarily in refugee camps in the North and South Kivu provinces. Several Rwandans who crossed the DRC were Hutu extremists who began forming militias in the Congo. Pressure increased when Tutsi militias formed against Hutu groupings, and foreign governments began to take sides. Significant participants include the Congolese government, rebel groups such as M23 and ADF, bordering countries (Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi), and international institutions like the United Nations.

The March 23 Movement (M23), mainly composed of ethnic Tutsis, was one of the most well-known rebel organizations in the early 2000s.

Understanding Congolese Sexual Violence

Sexual violence must be understood "not as an end in itself, but as a means to an end."

The institutionalized weaponization of women's bodies is an

intentional policy by warring parties aimed at destabilizing society and securing control. Sexual violence, including mass rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancies, and genital mutilation, has been used as a weapon of terror, displacement, and social dislocation. Women and girls of all ages have also commonly been targeted, subjected to forced abduction and sexual exploitation as “bush wives” or sex slaves, in addition to acts of public rape designed to cause collective trauma and shame. United Nations Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO) reports have described the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) prevalence of rape as “widespread, systematic, and at times used as a weapon of war” (UNJHRO, 2010). Survivors’ experiences documented by groups like Human Rights Watch and the International Rescue Committee include agonizing accounts. Scholarly analysis, particularly by researchers such as Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, suggests that such violence goes beyond being an incidental result of conflict and is a “militarized performance of masculinity and power” (Eriksson Baaz & Stern, 2009). They contend that the strategic use of sexual violence serves both as a tactical military end and as an ideological means of domination and ethnic terror. According to Nolen (2005, p. 56), Congolese women have experienced unprecedented levels of rape since the war began in 1998. Approximately 400,000 women in eastern Congo have been raped. During the decade of war, armed groups have been responsible for much of the perpetration, regardless of their combat status (HRW, 2009; Horwood, 2007).

The DRC’s sexual violence epidemic can be attributed to three factors: economic ambition, hegemonic societal constructs of masculinity, and the state’s institutional weaknesses. These three criteria create a sociopolitical framework in which individuals use sexual violence to attain strategic goals. Reports indicate that armed militants in eastern Congo are perpetrating sexual violence with unprecedented brutality. Beyond physical assault and disfigurement, a significant proportion of female victims endure aggravated sexual torture.

Sexual Violence and Militarized Masculinities

Feminist theorists like Cynthia Enloe and Carol Pateman have made significant contributions to understanding military masculinities and sexual violence. They contend that these ideas are intricately linked to gendered power dynamics and the production of national identities.

Women’s lives are impacted by militarization in both the public domain of governments, markets, and institutions, as well as the private domain of the home. Patriarchy gave rise to militarism, which in turn upholds and sustains patriarchal structures and viewpoints both domestically and internationally. (Cynthia Enloe, 1983) Since women account for the bulk of prewar, wartime, and postwar casualties, the militarization of masculinity has a substantial impact on them. This is because militarism creates gendered roles, expectations, and ideas that are accepted and hence continue unchallenged.

Is the gender hierarchy of male domination and female adjustment the actual mechanism in driving militarization and war? What happens to men’s and women’s gendered

manifestations when militarization is introduced? How are the bodies of men and women marked during the militarization process? Gendered militarization is frequently analyzed utilizing the conceptual binary of protector-protected. In short, gender is the order that labels the masculine as “Protector” and the feminine as “Protected,” making society more easily militarized.

The significance of a gendered approach in comprehending conflict is emphasized in Bouwer’s work. This suggests that she likely views sexual violence as intricately linked to societal conceptions of masculinity and femininity rather than as an unintended consequence of conflict. This perspective is supported by Bouwer’s study, which argues that the specific norms, beliefs, and power structures associated with military positions and ideology can create an environment where sexual violence is utilized as a means of dominance, control, and degrading treatment.

In general, gender inequality is the leading cause of rape. Sorial and Poltera claim that “the prevalence of rape or sexual assault stems from a lack of recognition and respect for women as equal moral agents” (Sorial & Patera, 2010). Isabel Phiri correctly stated why men rape: “ultimately rape is about power, it is used as a weapon of domination” (Phiri, 2006). However, rape as a weapon of war remains an unprecedented phenomenon.

Impact of the conflict on the women

Cookson (2010) reported in a startling piece headlined “In Congo, a Dead Rat is Worth More Than the Body of a Woman” that more than 15,000 rapes were recorded in the DRC in 2009, with an average of 40 women raped daily in the province of South Kivu alone. In the years after hostilities began, hundreds of thousands of women are alleged to have been raped.

The long-term impacts of these abuses are significant, with survivors facing prolonged psychological trauma, social exclusion, and ongoing medical complications. Additionally, impunity for these abuses remains rampant and continues to hinder efforts toward recovery and justice across the region. Foreign forces were not only interested in humiliating the Congolese people, but also in killing women and reducing the population. Many survivors of gun rape are now unable to have children. It is also stated that the Congolese national army and militia committed sexual abuse and rape against entire communities and families accused of siding with their opponents. HIV is also spreading widely among survivors, and they fear rejection from the community or divorce from their spouses. The health system’s ability to respond to sexual and gender-based violence has been hampered, with many survivors unable to seek treatment due to stigma, facility closures, and fear of future assault. Survivors encounter considerable barriers to getting needed medical care, sexual and reproductive health services, and the forensic evidence required for legal proceedings.

The Active Participation of Women in Community

Congolese women are in many forms of resistance and leadership, defying the notion of passive suffering. The battle is

described as a “continental feminist struggle where Congolese women, far from passive victims, lead resistance”. To protect their towns from rebel troops, some women, like Thérèse Ndarubyariye, have taken up arms and joined militia groups, demonstrating a strong commitment to community safety and self-defense. Others like Henriette Mbitse devote their lives to counseling and mentoring other survivors of sexual violence, promoting healing and solidarity in their communities.

Women are in the vanguard of resistance, peacebuilding, and even active armed resistance while being exposed to systematic weaponization and suffering from severe hardship. Given that they are already exhibiting crucial solutions and recovery routes, this entails giving local women-led organizations priority when it comes to funding, and they are meaningfully represented and included in all peace, security, and development decision-making processes.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have explained my motivation and interest in this study to the reader. I have also discussed the sociopolitical context of the wars in the DRC's eastern area and how they relate to women's rape.

I have specifically called the readers' attention to the human rights violations and sexual abuses that women endure at the hands of all armed organizations, including some civilians, who operate in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Genital mayhem and gang rape are examples of assaults. The nation is referred to as the “capital of rape” due to its history of wartime rape. The motivations behind attacking women are multifaceted. In addition to gender inequality, which is reflected in the way women are viewed as inferior citizens, opposing groups' hatred of one another and their use of rape as a low-cost weapon of war are the main causes of sexual violence in the DRC.

This research has emphasized that sexual violence is not just a tragic byproduct of conflict, but a planned, crucial tactic that deliberately maintains instability, destroys societal cohesiveness, and severely obstructs any hope for long-term peace. Congolese women consistently exhibit extraordinary fortitude and agency in the face of unimaginable adversity, acting as vital agents of change in environmental stewardship, peacebuilding, and resistance. Achieving dignity, justice, and long-term peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo requires a concerted, long-term, and unwavering commitment from the international community and national government.

REFERENCES

1. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/04/1162536>
2. Cookson. J 2010 - In Congo, A dead Rat Is Worth More Than the Body of a Woman. Big Think. [Online] <http://bigthink.com/women-and-power/in-congo-a-dead-rat-is-worth-than-the-body-of-a-woman>
3. Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives. Berkeley, University of California Press (2007).
4. Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link.
5. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/04/1162536>
6. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/24/mapping-the-human-toll-of-the-conflict-in-dr-congo>

7. <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-263?p=emailAOzdwkSr4bgknk&d=10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-263>
8. https://www.academia.edu/1898825/Militarized_Masculinities_and_the_Political_Economy_of_Wartime_Sexual_Violence_in_the_Democratic_Republic_of_Congo
9. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0886260512454742?icid=int.sj-abstract.similar-articles.1>